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AUTHOR Swick, Kevin J.
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ABSTRACT

The Teacher-Parent Partnership for the Enhancement of School Success Project was a cooperative project involving the University of South Carolina and the Salkehatchie Consortium (a collection of 18 rural school districts). Its goal was to increase the language, mathematics, social responsibility, and expressive skills of young at-risk children through an extension of the curriculum into the home. Ninety-two children and parents at three school sites (Allendale Primary, Denmark Primary and Estill Primary) participated. The project design consisted of a key concepts early childhood curriculum; training activities for teachers, parents, and children that promoted the curriculum in home and school settings; a collaborative management process; an extensive in-classroom emphasis on assisting at-risk learners; intensive parental involvement activities; a computer literacy curriculum; and a summer enrichment program. At the end of the one-year program, a criterion-referenced evaluation process was used to assess the project. The evaluation indicated that the collaborative design was very successful. The children improved impressively in all targeted areas (especially in communication skills), and in nontargeted areas. The most successful children had both teachers and parents who were highly involved with the project. (SAK)

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A Rural Teacher-Parent Partnership For The Enhancement Of School Success: An Executive Summary

Funding Source: U.S. Department Of Education FIRST Program ($200,000).

Principal Investigator: Dr. Kevin J. Swick, Professor - Early Childhood Education, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina 29208.

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The primary purpose of the Teacher-Parent Partnership For The Enhancement Of School Success Project was to increase the language, mathematics, social responsibility, and expressive skills of young at-risk children through an extension of the curriculum into the home. **Two goal-areas** provided the framework for achieving this purpose: (1) Through a cooperative strategy (university, schools, families, community), develop a systematic approach to extending the school curriculum into the home with an emphasis on language development, mathematics, expressive, and social skills, and (2) Implement a school and home-based curriculum for young children which: raises student achievement and increases educational opportunity; increases parent self-confidence and parent-child interactions; improves the quality of the home environment to better support education; and strengthens the instructional role of the teacher in the classroom and in relation to the family.

The project took place in three rural school districts in South Carolina (Allendale, Bamberg 2, Hampton 2) with the University ofSouth Carolina's Children's Center serving as the demonstration, development, and research site. This was a collaborative effort between the University and the Salkehatchie Consortium (The Consortium is a collection of 18 rural school districts in South Carolina that collaborate on various school improvement projects). Three school-sites (one in each of the participating districts) served as the arena for implementing the project: Allendale Primary, Denmark Primary, and Estill Elementary. **The children and parents** involved in the project (n=92) were judged to be "at-risk" in

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terms of school functioning by school officials. All of the children were Chapter I eligible.

Administrative and organizational components of the project were: a staff that included a director, 3 home-school-workers, a family-educator, and a graduate assistant. 15 teachers (including 3 demonstration teachers from the Children's Center) were involved in the project and 92 families participated in the project. The project used an advisory council, an external evaluator, and plethora of community and industry resources in carrying out the mission of the project. The project was collaboratively managed by the University's College of Education, the Salkehatchite Consortium, and the Superintendents of the three participating school districts **(See Diagrams 1 and 2 for a representation of the organizational and management system used in the project).** Key activities of the project were carried out by the director and the home-school-workers. Teachers provided major support in designing and implementing the school-home curriculum.

The project design included the following program elements: a key concepts early childhood curriculum (language, math, social, and expressive skills), training activities (inclusive of teachers, parents, and children) that promoted carrying out the curriculum in school and home settings; a collaborative management process involving all of the project's participants; an extensive in-classroom emphasis on assisting at-risk learners in acquiring key concepts skills; intensive parental involvement activities; a computer literacy curriculum; and a summer enrichment program.

At the center of the project's efforts was a key concept early childhood curriculum framework. This framework served as the context for involving teachers, parents, and children in exploring key learning concepts through a variety of school and home learning activities. The four key concept learning areas were: language, math, social responsibility, and expressive skills. Utilizing the research generated in early childhood curriculum, each concept area was developed into skills for instructional emphasis in school and in home learning. Key concept teaching plans were developed and used in the classroom. Home learning extension strategies and activities were used to integrate the program into the child's home experiences. Computer instruction was a significant part of the program.

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Parental involvement and training was an integral part of this project. Strategies used included: home visits, parent training sessions, conferences, home learning activities, in-classroom parent involvement, videotaped parent training sessions for home use, a "computer home-loan" program, and various informal modes of involving parents. The home-school-workers were key leaders in carrying out this parent involvement process.

Participating teachers were involved in various development and training activities: participation in the development of the key concepts early childhood curriculum framework; involvement in developing "teaching plans" for implementing the curriculum; participation in selecting and integrating new teaching/learning resources into their program; implementation of the curriculum in their classrooms and through home learning extension efforts; involvement in training sessions related to the work of the program; implementation of parent training sessions; and participation in monthly project planning sessions. In addition, teachers acquired computer literacy skills and deployed computer instruction as a significant part of implementing the curriculum. Teacher participation in required project training sessions was very high, reaching the 100% level except for seasonal illness.

Home-School-Workers provided the linkages between teachers and parents. They performed various roles in achieving this linkage: on-site management of project efforts; in-classroom instructional support activities related to the implementation of the curriculum; development and use of school-and-home learning strategies; coordination of the parent education/involvement aspect of the program; implementation of various parent participation strategies; and the deployment of appropriate documentation and assessment activities. The use of multiple parent involvement strategies by the home-school-workers produced observable improvements in teacher-parent interactions over the project year.

A summer enrichment program was designed and implemented to extend and reinforce the learning of the children and parents that took place during the regular school year. The summer program included regularly scheduled school-based learning activities for the children as well as a continuation of home learning initiatives used during the regular year. Enrichment activities included individualized activities for children with particular learning problems, group activities in the areas of language, math, and social responsibility skill development, and computer

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literacy instruction. The summer program lasted 5 weeks and was coordinated by the Home-School-Workers with assistance from teacher and parent volunteers.

A criterion-referenced evaluation process was used to insure that all activities and outcomes met the integrity of the goals and objectives of the project. Utilizing the project's goals and objectives, **a claim-indicator-assessment design was used to carry out the evaluation process.**

The key indicators assessed in the project were:

(1) The development and implementation of **the early childhood key concepts curriculum** by the teachers and home-school-workers.

(2) The selection and use of **appropriate non-computer instructional techniques** in the teaching of the key concepts curriculum in school and home settings.

(3) The selection and use of **appropriate computer instructional techniques** in teaching key concepts to children and families.

(4) The **integration of key concept instruction** into classroom and home learning settings by the teachers and home-school-workers.

(5) The **involvement of parents** in using key concept learning activities with their children in school and at home.

(6) The **planning, implementation, and assessment of parent involvement** activities by the home-school-workers.

(7) An **increase in parent self-confidence and self-image** in relation to their participation in their child's education and their interactions with teachers.

(8) An **increase in the school success of ninety at-risk children** enrolled in kindergarten/first-grade in the participating schools.

The assessment process focused on acquiring data on the existence and viability of "indicators" that reflected on the attainment of the project's claims. Multiple assessment procedures were used: attendance records, usage forms, grade-reports, questionnaires, check-lists, project products, process data, and anecdotal data gathered through observations and interviews. External assessment was conducted by an outside evaluator.

The findings of the project are summarized as follows per each claim area:

1.0.: Findings on teacher involvement in key concept curriculum development include: they engaged in 90 hours of training on early childhood key concept curriculum development **(claim-indicator 1.1.)**, and they were also involved in a total of 60 hours of curriculum development in the key concept learning areas **(claim-indicator 1.2.)**.

2.0.: The data on teacher involvement in utilizing computers in appropriate ways indicate: all of the teachers participated in specialized computer training experiences **(claim-indicator 2.1.)**, and a majority (80%) of them fully integrated computer instruction into their classroom instruction; with the remaining 20% achieving partial success **(claim-indicator 2.2.)**. Further, teacher evaluations of their computer training indicated the experiences were supportive of their efforts to strengthen this aspect of their teaching **(claim-indicator 2.2.)**.

3.0.: An assessment of teacher involvement in and usage of appropriate non-computer instruction indicated that all of the teachers participated in training sessions on this skill and process **(claim-indicator 3.1.)** as well as engaged in applying these skills in their development of key concept teaching plans **(claim-indicator 3.2.)**. In addition, project records and site visits confirmed the usage of these plans in classroom situations **(claim-indicator 3.2.)**.

4.0.: Project data indicate that all teachers participated in training on strategies for integrating key concept learning into their programs and that 85% of the teachers took advantage of follow-up sessions designed to strengthen their skills for achieving long-range institutionalization of project strategies **(claim-indicator 4.1.)**. Several indicators suggest that institutionalization of the key concepts

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curriculum did take place on a small scale: use of home learning activities, use of in-classroom teaching plans, implementation of computer training with the children and parents, and extensive usage of the "computer home-loan" program **(claim-indicator 4.2.)**.

5.0.: Project data indicate teacher involvement in engaging parents in school and home learning was achieved. All of the teachers were involved in the parent involvement training sessions **(claim-indicator 5.1.)**. In addition, all of the teachers participated in training sessions on working with at-risk parents **(claim-indicator 5.2.)**; home learning centers were developed and used in each of the project classrooms **(claim-indicator 5.3.)**; parents were involved in parent training and related home learning training sessions **(claim-indicator 5.4.)**; and teachers in the project used parents in various ways in classroom support roles **(claim-indicator 5.5.)**. Further project data indicate that teachers increased their parent involvement initiatives over past school years. Responses to items on the **TQ (Teacher Questionnaire)** indicate they made significant increases in holding parent meetings, conducting conferences, and in involving parents in classroom activities **(claims-indicators 5.2., 5.3., 5.4., 5.5.)**. The total mean increase in teacher-initiated parent involvement activities was 1.79 per month or 14.32 for the eight month period for which data were collected. Additional analyses indicate that there was great diversity of parent involvement patterns among the participating teachers.

6.0.: Data gathered related to the effectiveness of the Home-SchoolWorkers in promoting strong teacher-parent partnerships indicate the following: all three of the home-school-workers participated in extensive training on topics including "at-risk familes", parent involvement strategies, key concept curriculum work, and computer literacy skills. They participated in 80 hours of training directly related to their mission **(claim-indicator 6.1.)**. In addition, the home-school-workers were involved in carrying out various parental involvement and training strategies: conducting 8 parent training sessions; carrying out a minimum of 1 home visit per month per parent; involving parents in using home learning activities; and through various informal contacts with parents **(claim-indicator 6.2.)**. In addition, the home-school-workers completed or assisted in managing the evaluation aspect of the project **(claim-indicator 6.3.)**.

7.0.: Parent involvement in school and home learning situations was documented in six categories: home visits, conferences, in-classroom participation, home learning activities, parent training sessions, and informal involvement **(claim-indicator 7.1.)** Documentation of parent involvement activities indicate that parental participation increased in all categories over the project year; the highest rates of participation were in home visits, informal involvement, parent training sessions, and in the use of the computer "home-loan" program **(claim-indicator 7.1.).**

Data related to parent attitudes toward self, child, and school were probed through the use of a parent questionnaire **(PPI)**, teacher questionnaire **(TPI)**, and anecdotal reports by teachers, parents, and the home-school-workers. An analysis of the data collected indicate **a majority of parents reported gains in self-confidence as a parent** (teachers also reported a similar observation of improved self-confidence in parents). This self-report was confirmed by parent reports of increased involvement in their children's education as well as staff documentation of parent participation. There was consensus among the teachers that parental self-image had improved. Home-School-Workers also pointed to parenting behaviors that were indicative of improvement in parent attitudes toward self: enrollment in adult education courses, increased participation in all aspects of the project, and a marked increase in parent inquiries regarding their role in the project **(claim-indicator 7.2.).**

With regards to improvements in parental attitudes toward their children and the school, data from the **PPI** and the **TPI** is instructive. A large majority (82%) of parents felt they had better relationships with their children. In addition, 90% of the parents believed that they knew more about their children as a result of being involved in the project. Teacher support of "improved parent attitudes toward children" was also evident. 95% of the teachers said they had observed definite improvements in parent-child relationships during the year and all of the teachers felt that parents exhibited improved attitudes toward their children **(claim-indicator 7.2.).**

The findings were similar with regard to parent attitudes toward the school. On the **PPI,** 80% of the parents (n=91) indicated they were communicating more with their child's teachers this year than in the past and 94% said "I am a better partner now" with their child's teacher.

Results from the **TPI** indicated that teachers also felt that parents were communicating with them better and were a stronger part of the teacher-parent partnership than in past years. Home-School-Workers further supported the improvement in parent attitudes toward the school, especially noting that parent-teacher contacts had increased greatly during the project year **(claim-indicator 7.2.).**

8.0.: Four indicators were used to assess children's level of performance on school tasks: language, math, social, and expressive skills. Utilizing "quarterly grade-reports" (which included teacher assessments of children's language performance) it was determined that 63% (n=88) of the children made some progress or significant progress in their language skills **(claim-indicator 8.1.).** Utilizing a similar teacher assessment process it was determined that 48% made some or significant progress in acquiring needed math skills **(claim-indicator 8.2.).** Further, data from the **SRS (Social Responsibility Skills)** checklist indicate the children made substantial progress on following directions, sharing with others, and in being proactive members of their class. It also indicated they made substantial improvement in becoming responsible and self-disciplined; with less dramatic gains made in other areas of social responsibility **(claim-indicator 8.3.).** The children also made impressive gains in their expressive skills. Findings from the **Expressive Skills Checklist** indicate that 76% of the children were assessed as having improved or greatly improved in their expressive skills. This finding closely corresponded to the percentage of children making gains in the areas of social responsibility skills (75%). The data indicate that the children made the most dramatic progress in general communication skills, honesty attributes, openness to others, sensitivity, and in having positive relationships at home **(claim-indicator 8.4.).**

Several project observations and outcomes extended beyond the formal data collection process. These elements included: effectiveness of the collaboration process, observations on family-school relationship patterns, anecdotal information on "high-risk" families, project notes on staff interactions with at-risk parents, and observations regarding the children and parents who appeared to benefit the most from the project.

The collaboration design which called for continuing planning and "help-exchanges" among the university, public schools, business, parents, teachers, paraprofessionals, and children -- worked! The most effective

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components were: the university-school partnership system, the project advisory council structure and actions, and the paraprofessional-parent-child relationship aspect of the partnership. Less effective, but by no means ineffective, were the involvement of business, the functioning of school-site councils, and the direct teacher-parent interaction aspects of the project.

Teacher involvement in the instructional decision making process was clearly strengthened through the collaborative activities sponsored by the project. Not only did project training sessions promote across-school sharing, but **intra-school "teaming"** on activities such as ordering new resources, planning parent programs, setting up conferences with parents, and developing key concept teaching plans **promoted many positive sharing and helping relationships among teachers.**

Parents (especially those who were consistently involved in the project) **became more involved in making decisions regarding their roles in their children's learning and as related to their partnership with their child's teacher.** While parents seemed to be reticent about engaging in project-wide advisory work, they became very engaged in working with teachers and home-school-workers on matters that directly effected their children. Activities that related to improving children's school performance were especially effective.

Observations on elements that were influential in the projects success in involving teachers and parents in collaborative efforts are instructive. **The availability of trained paraprofessionals** as full/time home-school-workers was critical to structuring the school-family relationship for having meaningful partnerships. Further, with access to child care, transportation, training programs, and regular involvement with home-school-workers, **parents had a structure that strongly supported their involvement.** Likewise, teachers found that their training and added "supports" strengthened their classroom instruction and their relationship with their parents. In effect, by providing new resources and a school-site directed structure teachers and parents were able to explore ways of developing their relationship in a more effective manner.

Another significant process-outcome observed during the project was **the manner in which family-school relationships evolved.** The project, with its emphasis on having a close relationship with families, was influential in promoting in parents and children a positive orientation toward the school. The role of the home-school-workers and particular teachers in promoting this process was dramatic. **The HSWs,** who were chosen partly for their positive acceptance by parents, **were able to engage parents and children who indeed had real fears** about becoming too close to the school. In a similar fashion some teachers "identified" with particular family concerns or problems and thus were responsive and supportive of the families. The following are **elements of the project that had a positive influence on the participation patterns and attitudes of parents:**

*The positive and supportive actions of the home-school-workers.

*The inviting atmosphere created by some of the teachers in the project.

*The project's philosophy that all parents want to be involved in supporting their children's school success.

*The use of individualized parent involvement practices; thus allowing parents ways to get involved regardless of their work or family situations.

*The use of a diversity of teacher-parent involvement activities such as home visits, parent training programs, conferences, and other activities.

Project data (especially anecdotal records kept by two of the HSWs) also provided some useful **insights on the dynamics of the "low-participation" of "high-risk" parents in the project.** While these parents were involved, they tended to restrict their involvement to minimal requirements of the project. This group of parents was small, typically very young (19-26 age range), single or in a single-parent context, poor and illiterate, unemployed, and frequently abusing drugs. They were usually confronting multiple "risks" and often had a serious alcohol and/or drug addiction.

An observation regarding these parents was that **they usually were living in "high-risk, low-resource" situations.** They often had problems that were a part of their life since childhood and their school failure and related social pathologies were simply additional indicators of

their life-long problems. **The Home-School-Workers used several strategies** (with some success) in attempting to help the "high-risk" parents resolve their problems and to become effectively involved in project activities. Their strategies included: home-visits, intensive family support activities, collaborative support activities with other agencies, contacts with potential "family helpers", supportive work with the children's teachers, and informal counseling with the parents.

Progress with "high-risk" parents was slow, requiring the constant attention and reinforcement of the HSWs. The home-school-workers used many contacts with other family support agencies to reach the parents. Some of these proved very useful such as getting food-stamps for one parent, helping another parent get drug counseling, and supporting a parent in re-enrolling in high school. **A most helpful resource the HSWs found in their communities was what might be called "informal helpers".** In one case, for example, a relative served as the bridge between the HSW and the parent; attempting to get them involved in a productive way. In another case a pastor was influential in encouraging a young father to get alcohol abuse counseling.

Another very influential aspects of the project was the **"relationship styles" of the participating teachers and home-school-workers.** Some of the key teacher attributes that positively influenced the development of strong teacher-parent partnerships were: community identity, personality characteristics, beliefs about parent involvement, child-centeredness, and attitudes toward parents. **Teachers who identified positively with the community** were observed to be more involved with parents and more active in pursuing parent involvement in their classrooms. Teacher characteristics that seemed to have a positive influence were: sincerity, warmth, sensitivity, persistence, optimism, flexibility, and openness. Further, **teachers who believed strongly in parent involvement** were more active in initiating it and more enthusiastic and successful in attaining it.

Teachers who were "child-centered" (took time to work with children on an individual and personal basis) were also likely to be more "parent-centered". This observation was especially noted in cases where "teacher-style" was focused on integrating the needs of the children and families into the daily program of activities in the classroom. These teachers had more child and parent activities available in the classroom,

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took more time with the parents in terms of getting them involved, and were more personable and responsive in their individual relationships with parents. Ultimately, teacher efforts to create a "family-friendly" learning environment in the classroom was an accurate indication of their committment to parents.

A final issue that was explored throughout the project was: **What parents and children achieved the most as a result of the project?** What were they like? Four areas of parent and child involvement emerged as indicators of their achievement in the project. **Parental interest in and enthusiasm for the project itself** was one indicator of success-orientation. Another indicator of the highly successful parents and children in the project was that of their **high attendance and participation in both home and school learning activities.** Parents and children who benefitted the most from the project attended the most project-sponsored activities. **Self initiative was yet another key indicator** of the most successful parents and children. A final attribute noted to exist in the successful parents and children was their **committment to a partnership approach to learning.**

Children of the "success-oriented" parents were indeed beneficiaries of the project. Success indicators abound with regards to their progress during the school year: they made the largest gains in the key concept learning areas, all of them were fully promoted to the next grade level, they were judged by their teachers to have gained the most from the project, and they were the biggest users of the home learning resources in the project.

DIAGRAM 1

PROJECT ORGANIZATIONAL DESIGN

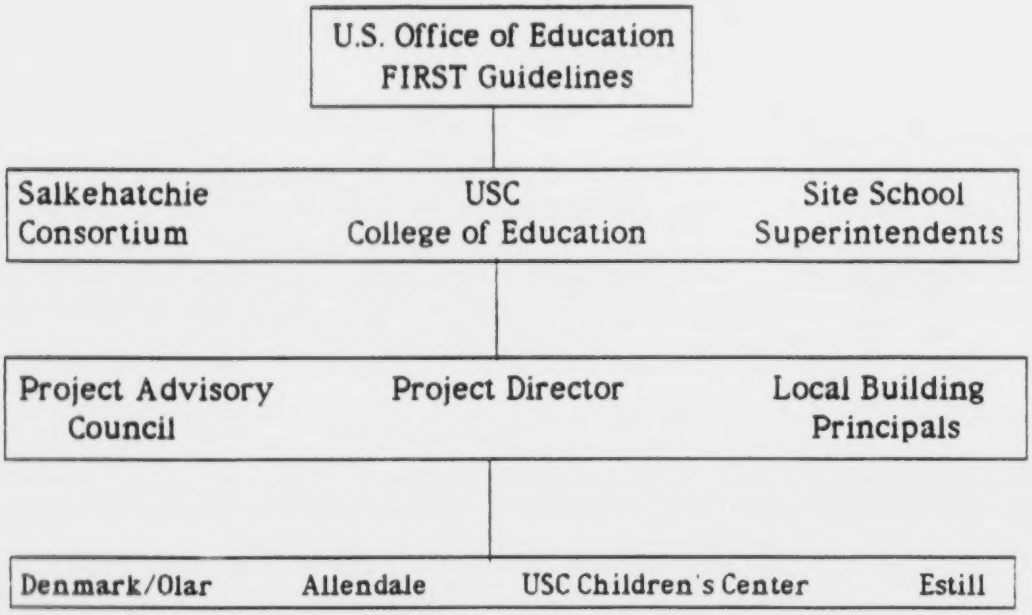

DIAGRAM 2

PROJECT OPERATIONAL DESIGN